



Research in Practice

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Spectator violence part 1: Professional sporting events

This is the first of a two part series on spectator violence at sporting events. Part one covers spectator violence at professional sporting events. The second will focus on issues of violence at amateur sporting events, particularly parents as spectators and the behaviours they exhibit. *Spectator violence* refers to any violent activity that occurs among those attending a sporting event. It can be directed at players, officials or fellow spectators. Types of spectator violence include verbal abuse, the throwing of missiles (such as bottles), property destruction and physical assaults (Madensen & Eck 2008). Throughout Europe and the United States, spectator violence is a well-publicised and researched issue (Russell 2008) and it is becoming an increasing concern in Australia for local communities, sports clubs and police (NSW Department of Sport and Recreation 2006).

The factors contributing to spectator violence can vary greatly, but often stem from poorly designed physical spaces, high energy events and inexperienced staff (Madensen & Eck 2008). A number of key measures have been developed that can be used to reduce the potential for violence at an event. These include:

- *promoting events as 'family friendly'*—events solely promoted at, and attracting, large numbers of young males are prone to be a setting for spectator violence (Russell 2008). Such 'high energy' events often use aggressive 'war and enemy' imagery to promote a great battle between teams. To minimise the risk of violence marketing events as 'family friendly' increases the likelihood of attracting a calmer, more diverse crowd less likely to engage in violent or threatening behaviour (Madensen & Eck 2008);
- *setting a good example*—professional sports people should be mindful of their conduct as role models for young fans. Shaking hands at the conclusion of a match and being conscious of their responses to contentious refereeing decisions are gestures of sportsmanship that are important in encouraging positive conduct in younger spectators (Russell 2008);
- *providing adequate seating*—ensuring spectators have access to sufficient seating can minimise the risk of crowding and consequent scuffles between spectators (Russell 2008);

- *reducing alcohol availability*—events where full-strength alcohol is easily accessible and inexpensive to purchase are more likely to experience incidents of spectator violence. Providing adequate signage of policies on liquor consumption and codes of conduct, serving low-strength alcohol and ensuring policies are enforced can reduce this risk (Madensen & Eck 2008);
- *behaviour and competency of officials and players*—police and security staff need to ensure the safety of patrons without giving the impression of over-policing, which can frustrate some spectators and lead to acts of aggression (Russell 2008); and
- *banning unruly spectators*—professional clubs have taken measures to ban spectators from future matches and from sporting grounds due to violent behaviours (ABC News 2009). This approach reinforces to the community that violent behaviour is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Developing codes of conduct and event management strategies in partnership with police, sporting bodies, club management and government will help minimise the risk of spectator violence and ensure event staff are well prepared to effectively deal with any isolated incidents (Madensen & Eck 2008).

Reference

All URLs correct at 19 April 2010

ABC News 2009. *NRL hands life bans to fans after crowd violence*. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/04/19/2546598.htm>

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Russell G 2008. *Aggression in the sports world: A social psychological perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press